**Bravery And Breakdowns In A Ridgetop Battle**

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*(edited for length by CoCmdTeam)*

Robert's Ridge aka Takur Ghar after the snow melted

A call had come in to headquarters just before daybreak: A Navy SEAL team was taking fire on an Afghan mountain ridge and needed help. As they raced in helicopters toward the site, Capt. Nathan Self and his platoon of Army Rangers were excited about the prospect of engaging al Qaeda. They'd spent more than two months in Afghanistan without a firefight.

They didn't know how many enemy fighters to expect. They didn't know exactly where the enemy might be. They didn't know exactly where the SEALs were, either. They did know that they were losing the advantage of darkness, flying by dawn's early light.

Two U.S. helicopters already had taken fire while trying to land on the ridge during the previous three hours, and two U.S. soldiers had been killed. Around 6:15 that morning, March 4, Self's chopper, a black, 52-foot Chinook, reached the ridge and started to descend.

The chopper was still about 20 feet off the ground when a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into its right engine, knocking it out. Enemy machine-gun fire ripped through the fuselage. Bullets started punching holes in the cockpit glass.

The chopper shook and dropped, landing hard enough to send the Rangers and aircrew sprawling across the floor. Within seconds, four men on the helicopter were killed, and the survivors were fighting for their lives.

By day's end, a seventh soldier, an Air Force search-and-rescue specialist, would bleed to death as Self's appeals for urgent evacuation were rejected by his superiors, who wanted no more daylight rescue attempts.

What became a 17-hour ordeal atop a frigid, desolate and enemy-ridden mountain ridge cost seven American lives, more combat deaths than any U.S. unit had suffered in a single day since 1993, when 18 Rangers and Special Operations soldiers died in battle in Mogadishu, Somalia. How the operation was conducted revealed serious shortcomings in U.S. military coordination and communication in Afghanistan. How it unfolded highlighted the extraordinary commitment of American soldiers not to leave fallen comrades behind: The entire episode spiraled out of an attempt to rescue a single SEAL, who had fallen out of the initial helicopter and was quickly shot by the enemy.

The firefight at Takur Ghar mountain came on the third day of Operation Anaconda, a three-week-long U.S. sweep against al Qaeda and Taliban forces in the Shahikot valley in eastern Afghanistan. The Mogadishu battle nine years ago precipitated the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia. This one, Pentagon officials credit with reinforcing the Bush administration's commitment to pursue the war even in the face of U.S. military casualties. Efforts are underway to award some of the military's highest decorations for valor to those who fought on the mountain.
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This account is drawn from extensive interviews with the Rangers, who are back in the United States, as well as Air Force air controllers, Air Force para-rescuemen, and the Army helicopter crews who flew the Special Operations team and Rangers to the ridge. The chopper crews asked that only their first names be used; one Ranger requested his name be withheld.

**'You Have This Dilemma'**

The Rangers left Bagram with only sketchy information about where they were headed and what they were to do. Initially, they had been told only that a helicopter had been hit by enemy fire and forced to land; later, they learned that someone had fallen out. A lightly armed infantry unit, the Rangers specialize in behind-the-lines evacuation and reinforcement missions. They work frequently with SEALs and other Special Operations teams.

More specific guidance arrived as the Rangers flew toward the scene. They received orders to link up with the embattledSEALs and extract them, along with the commando who had fallen. Beyond that, many details were lacking.

"You have this dilemma: Hold guys on the ground longer so they know exactly what they're going to do, or push them ahead so we can affect the situation sooner," said Self, 25, a Texas native and West Point graduate who had commanded the platoon for 17 months. "A quick

reaction force is never going to know everything that's going on. If they did, then they wouldn't be quick."

At headquarters, commanders tried to notify the Rangers that the SEALs had retreated from the ridgetop and to direct the helicopters to another landing zone further down the mountain. Due to intermittently functioning aircraft communications equipment, the Rangers and aircrew never received the instructions, according to the official review. Communication problems also plagued headquarters attempts to determine the true condition of the SEAL team and its exact location.

"As a consequence, the Rangers went forward under the false belief that the SEALs were still located on top of Takur Ghar and proceeded to the same location where both Razors 3 and 4 had taken enemy fire," the review said.

Nearing the mountain, Razor 2 went into a holding pattern. Self flew ahead on Razor 1 with his "chalk," nine young men in body armor over desert camouflage fatigues. In Afghanistan since December, the platoon -- Part of Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment -- had been scrambled a number of times, but it had not seen combat in the country, or anywhere else.

"The force flew to the place they knew the folks were in trouble," said a senior officer who monitored the battle. "They didn't know where the enemy or the Americans were. They were committed relatively blindly."

As they approached the landing site, the Rangers quickly found out how blind they really were. A rocket-propelled grenade knocked out the right engine, and enemy gunmen opened up on the damaged chopper.

Sgt. Philip J. Svitak, one of the forward gunners, fired a single burst of his 7.62mm gun from the copter's right side before being struck and killed.The other forward gunner, a flight engineer named David, was hit in the right leg.

"It basically just pissed me off," David said. "And I just pushed the trigger on my minigun and started sweeping fire on the left. I didn't know where the fire was coming from, I just knew we were taking fire. I wasn't going to let that happen without shooting back."

The chopper slammed to the ground. David collapsed in a corner and used a lanyard from his 9mm pistol to tie a tourniquet on his leg. He knew it was broken -- every time he tried to move it, the whole thing would twist.

Bullets were zooming through the cockpit glass. A round shattered one of the pilot's legs below the knee, another knocked off his helmet. The pilot, Chuck, popped open his emergency side door and flopped onto the snow. A bullet or fragment ripped a chunk out of the left wrist of the other pilot, Greg. Another bullet cut into his thigh. He staggered out of the cockpit toward the rear of the aircraft, holding his wrist as it spurted blood.

The incoming machine-gun fire was turning the aircraft's insulation into confetti. An RPG shot through the right forward window, hit a high-altitude oxygen console on the wall and started a fire.

"It's chaos at that point. Nobody has a grip on what's going on," said Cory, the chopper's medic. "I took three rounds in the helmet. It knocked me down," he recalled. "I was on my back. Somehow the impact caused a small laceration in my eyebrow. But it was bleeding a decent amount. I was on my back, and the blood was running down my face, and it took me a second to gain my senses and I realized I was okay."

Sean, the crew chief on the right rear side, shouted to Cory, "You need to put that fire out." But the forward fire extinguisher was missing. Brian, the other rear crewman, passed an extinguisher forward. Cory put out the fire, but the rest of the chopper was pure hell. The air was laced with smoke and bullets, and the enemy seemed to be everywhere. "I Saw the Tracers"

The Rangers were supposed to exit down a back ramp in an order they had practiced countless times. Those on the left would assemble outside on the left side of the chopper. Those on the right would assemble right.

But the moment had turned into a mad scramble to get out in whatever order they could. One Ranger, Spc. Marc A. Anderson, was shot and killed while still in the helicopter. Two others -- Pfc. Matthew A. Commons and Sgt. Bradley S. Crose -- were gunned down on the ramp.

At 21, Commons was the youngest in the group, with a reputation as a good-humored, enthusiastic soldier. Crose, 22, a leader of one of the platoon's four-man teams, was a quiet professional. Anderson, 30, was a former high school math teacher who had awed his fellow Rangers with his knowledge of weaponry. Now they were dead.

The surviving Soldiers peeled off in different directions, wheeling around in the knee-deep snow, scurrying for cover behind whatever rocks they could find and firing on enemy positions.

The enemy was concentrated in two spots 50 to 75 yards away, looking down on the chopper from dug-in, fortified positions atop the ridgeline. Two or three fighters were shooting from the left rear side of the Chinook -- at about the 8 o'clock position. Staff Sgt. Raymond M. DePouli, the first Ranger out, began blasting away at them with his M4 assault rifle.

"I saw the guy shooting at me, I saw the tracers. I got hit in my body armor," said DePouli, a squad leader. "I turned and dumped a whole magazine into him. Then I just got down prone . . . to make sure nothing else came over the hill."

Another cluster of enemy fighters was behind a boulder and under a tree to the front of the helicopter, off to the right at about 2 o'clock. They were firing machine guns and RPGs at the Americans. One slammed near the right side of the copter.

Spc. Aaron Totten-Lancaster, a long-distance runner considered the fastest in the battalion, took shrapnel in his right calf. Shrapnel also cut a wound in Self's right thigh and put a small hole in

the left shoulder of Air Force Staff Sgt. Kevin Vance, a tactical air controller attached to the Ranger unit.

Another RPG soared over the Rangers' heads, skipping off the helicopter's tail. Self could see the torso of the man who fired it suddenly exposed above a boulder. DePouli, moving around from the other side of the helicopter, saw him, too, and shot him in the head.

Nearly all the Rangers were hit. A machine gun belonging to Spc. Anthony Miceli got shot up. A bullet slammed into helmet of Staff Sgt. Joshua Walker, another team leader.

Only Pfc. David Gilliam, the newest member of the platoon, avoided a hit to either his body or his equipment. He had jumped to the right side of the chopper, then scrambled to reassemble scattered ammunition belts for his M240B heavy machine gun.

Self thought that the bullets flying past sounded different from what he had expected, almost like a clicking instead of a crack. The smell, too, was something he hadn't imagined, a mixture of cedar from the trees dotting the ridgeline, fuel, gunpowder, metal, sweat, blood and something faintly like strawberries. It all seemed so strange. "You see something happening and it doesn't seem real," Self said. "We understood we were getting shot. But it just seemed like a bad movie."

Disorienting and frightening as the first intense minutes of combat were, a sense of anger and indignation quickly took hold.

"Who do these guys think they are?" Walker shouted. He bounded forward, firing his M4 and taking up a position behind a rock on the chopper's right side. Self and Vance joined him.

Totten-Lancaster started to move toward them. "I didn't really know I had been hit until I got up to run and couldn't," he said. His right leg disabled, Totten-Lancaster rolled several yards to the rock.

Slightly behind this group and farther to the right, DePouli and Gilliam, the machine gunner, took cover behind another rock. There they found the bullet-ridden body of an enemy fighter with an unused RPG.

Miceli, the seventh surviving Ranger, remained on the left side of the chopper, guarding that flank.

Several Rangers tried hurling grenades toward the enemy position about 50 yards away, but the farthest they could throw was about 35 yards. Enemy fighters heaved fragmentation grenades at the Rangers, only to have them land short, their explosions muffled by the snow.

The Rangers enlisted two of the helicopter crew members in the fight. Don, the air mission commander, and Brian, a rear crew chief, were told to fetch more ammunition from the helicopter, as well as an M203 grenade launcher that Commons had been carrying when he was shot on the ramp.

"I'd like to say we were out of our element, as we're aviation and the Rangers are ground guys," said Don, a 26-year veteran. "So when they tell us, 'We need you to do this,' I'm in their element, I'm going to listen to what they say."

With the Rangers providing covering fire, the two crewmen dashed back and forth to the chopper. But the thin air quickly left them spent.

"I found it easier to roll across the snow," Don said. "If I could roll within 10 feet of them and throw it, I would."

For all the surprise and confusion of the early minutes, the Rangers fought-by-the-book. Reacting to the attack, they sought cover and returned fire. Next, their training taught them to try to take the fight to the enemy, to look for flanking positions and consider avenues for assault.

On the right, the terrain dropped off steeply, ruling out a move that way. On the left was high ground. Moving there would leave them exposed to enemy fire.

"That's when we made the decision that the only way to assault would be straight at them," Self said.

Gilliam was told to provide covering fire with his heavy [editor: incorrect, medium] machine gun. Brian was assigned as assistant gunner -- "AG" for short -- to feed ammunition belts into Gilliam's M240B. "I didn't know what he was talking about when he said AG," Brian said. "Then he explained it to me, and I said, 'Okay, I can do that.' "

As Gilliam opened fire, Self, DePouli, Walker and Vance charged, guns ablaze, grenades at the ready. Halfway up the hill, about 25 yards from the enemy, Self spotted a fighter pop his head from around a tree.

"All I could see was from chest up because he was dug down into the ground," Self said. "He shot at us and then disappeared."

Self suddenly realized that the enemy fighters were better protected than he had thought, shielded by a built-up cover of leaves, logs and branches. An assault on such a fortified position would require more than four Soldiers.

"Bunker! Bunker! Bunker!," he shouted. "Get back."

The Rangers retreated to the rocks.

**"We Were Spectators Watching"**

Watching Predator imagery of the Chinook's landing, military commanders in Bagram were stunned by the ferocity of the ambush.

"It was gut-wrenching," Hagenbeck said. "We saw the helicopter getting shot as it was just setting down. We saw the shots being fired. And it was unbelievable the Rangers were even able to get off that and kill the enemy without suffering greater losses."

Although Hagenbeck was the senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan with responsibility for much of Operation Anaconda, he did not control the Ranger mission. That authority fell to Air Force Brig. Gen. Gregory Trebon, who ran a separate unit overseeing special operations. Trebon's command post also was at Bagram, but set apart from Hagenbeck's. A liaison officer who reported to Trebon sat next to Hagenbeck. Trebon declined to be interviewed.

"Literally, we were spectators watching," Hagenbeck said. "We did not know what the [SEAL] rescue squad on the ground had been reporting. I still don't know to this day what they reported to the commander here and what was transmitted to the Rangers on board the helicopter -- whether they said there's no other way to get here, or if they said we can suppress the enemy fire, or if they said we're going to lose some guys but it's the only way to do it. We were just looking at a screen without any audio to it."

While the Rangers were in the firefight, a Special Operations combat controller traveling with them, Air Force Staff Sgt. Gabe Brown, set up a communications post about 25 yards behind the helicopter, down a slope and behind a rock. He established a radio link with the SEALs.

That was how Self and his team got the news: The SEALs they had come to rescue were not even on the ridgetop any more. They had moved some distance down the mountain before the Rangers had arrived.

"They had two wounded, and I was led to believe they were going to stay" down the mountain, Brown said. "I believed they were holed up for the duration of the day."

Brown worked furiously to make contact with U.S. fighter jets in the area, frustrated by communications glitches. About 20 minutes after the chopper crashed, he managed to reach headquarters and ask for air support. Controllers gave him additional frequencies for talking with the incoming jet fighters.

"We have F-15s inbound on station," Brown shouted.

The first question for the besieged ground force was: bombs or bullets? Should the jets start unleashing bombs or begin with 20mm cannon fire? The Rangers decided on bullets, to minimize the chance of getting hit themselves.

After emptying their cannons in several runs, the F-15s were joined by a pair of F-16s, which had been about 180 miles away over north-central Afghanistan when the call came to go to Ginger. Swooping over the ridgetop, the F-16s unloaded 1,000 rounds.

But the enemy bunker continued to menace the Rangers, so the order was given for bombs. With Brown working the radio, and Self and Vance shouting back targeting adjustments based on where the bombs were hitting, the ground team tried to walk the bombs toward the bunker.

The first bomb, a 500-pound GB-12, dropped down the hill behind the helicopter. The next struck on the ridge crest, in front of the chopper. The third scored a direct hit on the bunker, splitting a tree.

Piloting the lead F-16, Air Force Lt. Col. Burt Bartley, commander of the 18th Fighter Squadron, was uneasy about how close to their own position the ground troops were calling for strikes.

"When I dropped one of those bombs, the ground controller said, 'Whoa, you almost got us with that one. Can you move it a little closer to the tree?' " Bartley said. "And in my mind, and what I called to my wingman was, 'No, I can't.' In my mind, that was as close as I dared get or I would kill him."

Military rules allow ground troops, under exceptional circumstances, to authorize airstrikes inside standard safety limits.

"If it's that close, they generally ask for the initials of whoever is in charge on the ground," Self said. "I was passing my initials over the radio because we were dropping that stuff within 50 meters of us."

The airstrikes suppressed the enemy fire and took out one critical bunker. But at mid-morning, the ridgetop was still in enemy hands.

Fire and Cold

Inside the helicopter, Cory, the aircrew medic, and two Air Force para-rescuemen -- Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham and Tech. Sgt. Cary Miller -- tended to casualties in the cargo bay.

The wounded included three members of the aircrew: Chuck, the pilot, who had been pulled around to the back of the helicopter after being shot in the leg and falling out his cockpit door onto the snow; Greg, the co-pilot, who had received a tourniquet to stop the bleeding from his left wrist; and David, the flight engineer, who had been shot in the leg.

Cory kept the casualties on the aircraft to try to shield them from enemy fire and from the cold. He knew that anyone who had lost a significant amount of blood was more susceptible to hypothermia. But the cargo bay was itself still a fire zone. From their elevated vantage off the nose of the aircraft, enemy fighters could see into the right side of the aircraft and shoot at anyone moving. "So the only way we could move was to crawl on our bellies," Cory said.

The enemy shooting subsided after the bomb dropped by the U.S. jet hit the bunker, and Cory shifted the wounded to an area behind the helicopter. All three had suffered life-threatening injuries, but the bleeding had stopped, and Cory considered their conditions stable. Even so, they needed more extensive care, and Cory was eager to get them evacuated.

"We knew at that point that until we took the hill, there was no way they could get out of there," said Don, the air mission commander.

For that, the Rangers would have to wait for more help, which was on its way.

Sgt. Eric W. Stebner knew something about snow and cold, having grown up in North Dakota. He also knew something about mountain trekking, having trained as an Army Ranger and climbed rocks in the Shenandoah Mountains.

But neither Stebner nor any of the other nine U.S. Army Rangers struggling behind him on the morning of March 4 had encountered anything like Takur Ghar, the mountain in eastern Afghanistan on which they found themselves.

They faced a climb up a steep, forbidding slope, with upwards of 80 pounds of military gear, wearing inappropriate clothing and boots, and under sporadic enemy fire. They also were in a race against time.

The other half of their unit was stranded at the top of the ridge, their helicopter shot down shortly after sunrise. They had flown in to rescue a Navy SEAL team, only to be ambushed by enemy fighters. Four of the quick-reaction force were dead, three aircrew members were seriously wounded and the rest of the contingent was pinned down.

The ordeal had begun around 3 a.m., when the SEALs had come under attack as their helicopter landed on the ridge for a reconnaissance mission. One, Navy Petty Officer First Class Neil C. Roberts, fell off the damaged chopper as it took off. The SEALs returned to rescue Roberts and were ambushed again, losing the Air Force combat controller in their group, Tech. Sgt. John Chapman.

It was day three of what the U.S. military called Operation Anaconda, a three-week-long offensive against members of al Qaeda and the Taliban in the Shahikot valley. Over the course of 17 hours, seven Americans lost their lives, the highest number of combat deaths in a single day by any unit since 18 Rangers and Special Operations soldiers had been killed in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993.

As their comrades began the climb, the Rangers on the ridgetop had made one uphill attempt to assault enemy positions on a crest line 50 to 75 yards away. They were forced to retreat behind boulders near their downed MH-47E Chinook. Although airstrikes had silenced some enemy fire, the Rangers lacked sufficient manpower and weaponry to try again.

They were worried about an enemy counterattack. They saw enemy fighters moving in the distance toward their rear, and U.S. military spotters and aircraft picked up other signs of enemy reinforcement efforts.

Mortar shells fell around their chopper. The first landed ahead of the nose, the next one down the hill to the rear, suggesting the enemy was attempting to zero in on them. The whooshing of the

shells sent shivers through the Americans, especially the helicopter crewmen, who were unaccustomed to ground combat.

Concerned about the condition of the three wounded aircrew members, some of the chopper team pressed the Ranger platoon's commander, Capt. Nathan Self, to mount a new assault to clear the way for an evacuation. Self told them he needed reinforcements first.

"They didn't understand the timetable that we were really on," Self said. "They expected things to happen quick, quick, quick: 'You guys run up there and kill the enemy.'"

But Self shared their sense of urgency. He worried they all would be in trouble unless the rest of his unit got up to the top soon.

That half of the Ranger force, designated Chalk 2, had been in a helicopter over the Shahikot valley when Self took his Chalk 1 team to the ridge. Shortly afterward, communication with the chopper carrying Chalk 1 was lost, and Chalk 2 flew to Gardez, a town northwest of the valley that was a staging area for the larger U.S. offensive. As time ticked by with no information about the lead Ranger group, Chalk 2 grew anxious.

"At one point, I had a crew chief by the collar," said Staff Sgt. Arin Canon, the ranking Ranger in Chalk 2. "I'm screaming at him that regardless of what happened, the first bird only had 10 guys on it. That's the bare minimum package. If something happened to them, they need us. We complete the package."

Then word came in that the chopper carrying Chalk 1 had gone down. Within 30 to 60 minutes – accounts vary – Chalk 2 was back in the air and heading toward the ridgetop.

The first challenge was finding a place to set down. "It's the side of a mountain, so there are not a whole lot of places to land," said Ray, who piloted the chopper. "You basically hunt and peck around."

At about 8:30 a.m, the crew found a space just big enough to get all the wheels on the ground. The aircrew had advised the Rangers that Chalk 1 would be straight ahead of them, about 250 to 300 yards away. After they got off, the Rangers learned that Chalk 1 was actually about 2,000 feet up the mountain, at an altitude of 10,200 feet. The plan had changed, but no one told the Rangers.

**"We Have to Keep Moving"**

The Chalk 2 Rangers surveyed the landscape. Towering before them was a rocky slope angling as steep as 70 degrees in places and covered with snow as deep as three feet. They also could see, off to the right and about 1,000 feet up, another small cluster of Americans – members of the SEAL unit the Rangers had been sent to rescue.

The SEALs were edging their way down the mountain with two wounded. Two other members of their original team – Roberts and Chapman – had been killed on top.

A SEAL who had flown in with Chalk 2 to link up with the Navy unit asked whether the Rangers could hike over to help the SEALs before beginning their climb. Canon forwarded the request to Self up on the ridgetop.

"I've got casualties up here, and I need you now more than they need you," Self radioed back. The SEAL headed across the mountain alone to join his team members. The Rangers of Chalk 2 headed up.

"It was kind of like a merry-go-round," said Chalk 2's medic, who asked that his name not be used. "We were trying to go up and they were coming down."

With no trail to follow, the Rangers blazed a path of their own. One route to the right looked promising but would take them close to an enemy bunker on top. They chose a course to the left that appeared to provide some cover from enemy fighters and bring them around to the rear of Chalk 1's position.

Canon, who is qualified in Army mountain warfare, thought that if this had been a planned route of attack, scouts would have eased the way with fixed rope lines. The Rangers struggled for traction on the loose shell rock.

"Just the grade of the ridge made it an unbearable walk, not including the altitude," Canon said. "It was enough to where my guys' chests felt heavy and my joints were swollen."

The Rangers at times got down on all fours – "kind of like a bear crawling up," in the words of the medic. Enemy mortar attacks punctuated the climb, although they were sporadic and poorly aimed.

"Everyone would stop and look to see where they were coming from," said Stebner, one of the squad's two team leaders. "I would say, 'You can't stop. It's not going to do us any good to stop. We have to keep moving.'"

Their weighty gear only made things worse. The Rangers' body armor alone totaled 22 pounds a set. Most of the Soldiers carried an M4 assault rifle, seven to 12 magazines of ammunition, two to four grenades, a pistol, knives, lamps, radios, night vision gear, a first aid kit and 100 ounces of water. Their helmets added another three to four pounds.

"There were some places where I had to throw my weapon up ahead of me, then climb up and pick it up again," said Spec. Jonas O. Polson, who carried one of the squad's two 17-pound M249 light machine guns, called SAWs for Squad Automatic Weapons.

Spec. Randy J. Pazder, the [incorrect: medium] heavy machine gunner, probably had the biggest load, with a 28-pound M240B gun plus 30 pounds or so of ammunition. His assistant gunner, Spec. Omar J. Vela, carried a spare barrel and another 30 pounds of ammo.

"You need to get to the top of the hill, where we'll be in a static position and can rest," Canon told them. "We've got to go, our guys need us."

When they were scrambled for the mission, most of the Rangers had been under the impression that they were being sent on a quick, in-and-out rescue. "My understanding originally, when they woke me up, was that a helicopter had been forced to land and we were going to pick up the crew – basically, just a taxi-ride type of thing," the medic said.

Anticipating a lot of sitting in cold, drafty helicopters or in stationary ground positions, many put on thermal underwear and bulky parkas that were now impeding their movement and causing them to sweat profusely. Others were wearing suede desert boots instead of cold-weather footgear. The desert boots soaked up the snow like sponges.

About halfway up, as the Rangers shimmied around a rock and hoisted themselves past a tree that jutted from the mountain face, Canon figured something had to give. "I took a look around and everybody had the, you know, 'Man, this sucks' face – just a long face," the staff sergeant said.

The Rangers began to shed their heavy clothes, and Canon relayed permission from Self that they could take off the back plate of their body armor. Getting rid of the $527 plates was a risky move. The basic Kevlar vest worn by troops protects against 9mm bullets; ceramic plates, placed in front and back, offer an additional layer to stop 7.62mm bullets – the kind fired by AK-47 assault rifles used by al Qaeda.

Removing the back plate would save only six pounds, but would allow greater mobility and comfort. Most elected to take them off. But to avoid leaving them for the enemy, the Soldiers shattered the plates by heaving them onto the rocks below.

"It's the most expensive Frisbee you'll ever throw," Canon told the men.

As they continued climbing, many of the Rangers thought of their buddies on the ridge. They knew there were casualties, although they did not know who or how many had been hurt or killed.

Many assumed that at least one of the casualties had to be Spec. Anthony R. Miceli, a SAW gunner considered the most accident-prone in the group. So legendary was Miceli's tendency to injure himself that the platoon had a saying about him: "No one could kill Miceli except Miceli."

Coming over the final rise, the first thing Canon glimpsed were the casualties spread out on the ground near the helicopter's rear ramp. Miceli's luck had held. His SAW had been shot up, but he had picked up another gun and was still in the fight. Even so, Canon was shocked to see so many dead or wounded.

A climb Canon had estimated would take about 45 minutes lasted more than two hours. Chalk 2 was joined with Chalk 1, but the Rangers would have little time to rest.

**"Everybody Just Went for It"**

The Rangers moved quickly to organize an assault on the ridgetop. The chief objective would be the one enemy bunker they could see – off to the right of the nose of the helicopter and about 50 yards away. An airstrike had appeared to silence the bunker, but the Rangers were not sure whether enemy fighters were still in it – or beyond.

The heavy machine gun team from Chalk 2 – Pazder and Vela – moved to a rock beside the helicopter, joining Chalk 1's machine gunner, Pfc. David B. Gilliam. Canon hunkered down between the two machine guns.

"Sergeant, I don't know if I'd get right there," Gilliam said in his thick Tennessee drawl. "I about got shot there a while ago."

"Well, I don't plan on getting shot today, Gilliam, so you just keep the fire on," Canon replied.

The assault team, composed largely of members of Chalk 2, got into position behind another rock slightly ahead and to the left of the machine guns.

The machine gunners let loose with supporting fire. Stebner, Sgt. Patrick George and Sgt. Joshua J. Walker pushed forward along with Spc. Jonas O. Polson, Spc. Oscar Escano and Staff Sgt. Harper Wilmoth. The Rangers moved at what they call the "high ready" – weapons on their shoulders, their eyes focused directly over gun sights. They tossed grenades as they advanced.

Rangers train to use two four-man teams for an assault, with the teams focusing on maneuver while other elements provide supporting fire. In this case, the Rangers had only a team and a half.

"When the supporting fire opened up, everybody just went for it," Wilmoth said. "The snow was so deep, and the terrain under it was rocky, so our footings weren't too good. We pretty much had to lead by gunfire."

The Rangers were pouring on so much fire that some of the chopper crew worried they were overdoing it. The crew yelled at the Rangers to "slow down, they're going to run out of ammo," Self said.

The assault group made it to a boulder about 40 yards up the hill, near the enemy bunker that was just around to the right. Stebner, approaching the boulder first, stumbled across a body lying face down in the snow. It was a dead American – he couldn't tell who and didn't have time to stop.

From the boulder, Wilmoth, George and Escano went for the bunker, finding two dead enemy fighters. Sandwiched between the fighters – amid the debris left by an earlier airstrike – was the body of another American. Stebner and Polson went left, then circled around right, blasting at other enemy positions over the crest.

The end, when it came, was strangely anticlimactic. The Rangers did all the shooting during the 15-minute assault. At the top, they found a network of enemy positions dug next to trees or behind rocks and connected by shallow trenches. A canvas tent sheltered one position.

The area was strewn with Chinese-made 30mm grenade launchers, sheaves of rocket-propelled grenades, a 75mm recoilless rifle, a Russian-made DShK heavy machine gun, long bands of machine-gun ammunition and assorted small arms.

The Rangers say they are not certain how many they killed. Self credits his men with killing at least two during the assault, and there were other bodies of enemy fighters scattered around the ridgetop. But the Rangers say it was difficult to determine how many had died from airstrikes or in firefights with SEALs earlier in the day. A U.S. military team that visited the site days later counted eight enemy bodies.

After the shooting stopped, Canon went to identify the two dead Americans. Near the boulder lay Roberts, the SEAL who had fallen out of the chopper eight hours earlier. Some of his military gear was later recovered elsewhere in the area, and a dead enemy fighter was found wearing Roberts's jacket. In the bunker, Canon identified Chapman.

It was about 11 a.m. Chalk 1 had been on the ridge nearly five hours.

Feeling more secure and a bit more relaxed, the Rangers shifted their command and communications post to the ridgetop. They made plans to move the dead and wounded from behind the chopper to the other side of the crest, where there appeared to be a suitable landing zone for evacuation.

Canon, the most senior noncommissioned officer on the mountain, sat down beside Self, who told him the names of the Rangers who had died. "It hit me pretty hard, and I remember having to take a second and pause," Canon said.

Self could not afford to have Canon – or any of the other men – lost in mourning, not with all that still needed to be done to get them all off the mountain.

"He said, 'Arin, there's nothing we can do about it now,' " Canon recounted. "He pretty much reminded me to get my head back into the game – 'Let's get the rest of these guys out of here alive, and we'll deal with what we have to deal with when we get back.'"

Down behind the chopper, Greg, one of the two wounded pilots, was taking a turn for the worse. "I hesitate to say he was close to dying. But he had a definite change in his level of consciousness," said Cory, the chopper's medic. "He was starting to speak to me as if he was going to die."

**"I Have Only Two Magazines Left"**

On the radio, Headquarters was asking whether the ridgetop was "cold," meaning no longer vulnerable to enemy attack.

"Controller asked me if the pick-up zone [PZ] was cold and how many guys we were going to lose if we waited to be exfiltrated," Air Force Staff Sgt. Kevin Vance, a tactical air controller attached to the Ranger unit, said in a sworn statement to Air Force authorities three weeks later. "I asked the medic, 'If we hang out here, how many guys are going to die?' The medic said at least two, maybe three. I reported to controller, 'It is a cold PZ, and we are going to lose three if we wait.'"

But just as he said that, three or four enemy fighters on a knoll to the south, 300 to 400 yards behind the chopper, opened fire.

Machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades started ripping into the casualty collection area. Bullets also ricocheted around the feet of Rangers and aircrew members carrying the first of the casualties up the hill – David, the flight engineer, who had been shot in the leg.

The group dropped the litter and ran for cover, leaving David on his back on the hillside. Stebner, one of the carriers, twiced dashed out to try to drag David behind some rocks, only to abandon him again. "I stayed out there a good 15, 20 minutes, just watching stuff go over us," David said.

The third time, Stebner reached David and pulled him out of harm's way.

Down behind the chopper, Cory and an Air Force para-rescueman, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, had just inserted a fresh IV into Greg when they came under fire. Their position left them exposed.

"We realized we were just going to have to sit there and shoot it out with them," Cory said. "Neither Jason nor I were going to leave."

One rocket-propelled grenade came straight at them and zoomed over their heads, exploding above the helicopter. One bullet struck about three feet in front of Cory, kicking snow over him.

"We were shooting back and forth," Cory said. "And I can remember getting down, thinking, 'I have only two magazines left – something has to happen here pretty soon.'"

That's when he and Cunningham were hit.

"I had turned over on my stomach and crawled up a hill about five feet, thinking this might do something," Cory said. "I turned back on my back to shoot, and it was just shortly after that that Jason and I got shot at the same time. We were sitting no more than five or six feet apart."

Two bullets hit Cory in the abdomen, but the impact was cushioned by his ammunition pouch and belt buckle.

"It took me a little while to get up enough courage to check myself out," he said. "As a medic, you realize that a penetrating wound to the abdomen can be absolutely the worst thing. So I

reached my hand down there and tried to see how much blood there was. I pulled my hand back initially and it was wet with water. That was a very reassuring sign." The water was from his punctured canteen.

Cunningham was in worse shape: He was hit in the pelvic area and bleeding profusely. Although still lucid, he was in considerable pain.

Good-natured and enthusiastic, Cunningham, 26, was popular with his fellow para-rescuemen, known as "PJs," for parajumpers. He had been a PJ for all of eight months. It was his first time in combat.

Rangers down the hill from the copter shot at the enemy position with a heavy machine gun, a SAW light machine gun, a grenade launcher and several M4 assault rifles. They watched some of the enemy fighters maneuvering around the backside of the hilltop, shooting at the Rangers from two directions.

"We could see the tops of their heads, barely," said Staff Sgt. Raymond M. DePouli, a member of Chalk 1.

Pazder, spotting an enemy fighter pop up to the left, let loose a burst from his M240B heavy {medium] machine gun and killed him.

Off to the east, about 700 or 800 yards away, the Rangers noticed four or five other enemy fighters walking up. Canon figured he could reach them with the heavy machine gun but he needed more ammunition. He sent Vela, the assistant gunner, back to the helicopter about 150 to 200 yards away.

As Vela dashed back, more enemy fire erupted and Vela dove for cover behind a rock with Stebner. "You might not want to be by me because for some reason the enemy doesn't like me," said Stebner, who had been dodging bullets trying to pull Dave to safety.

"What are you talking about?" Vela said.

Just then, a rocket-propelled grenade soared over their heads.

"That's one thing I'm talking about," Stebner said. "Every time I get up and move, they shoot at me. And now I'm laying here and they're shooting at us."

Vela crawled to another rock outcropping, joining DePouli. He wrapped the machine-gun ammunition in a bag normally used to hold the spare gun barrel and tossed it to Canon, reaching only halfway.

Canon scrambled out on all fours and dragged the bag back to the spot behind several boulders where he and Pazder were set up. Pazder passed the heavy gun to Canon, who had a better angle on the enemy below.

"We poured machine gun fire onto every tree or bush where they may have been hiding," Canon said. "I don't remember seeing them again."

The enemy fighters on the knoll kept shooting at the Rangers for more than 20 minutes. Then Navy F-14 fighter jets arrived and dropped about a half-dozen 500-pound bombs on or around the enemy position, silencing it.

"With one three-pound burst, shrapnel could be heard traveling through the air," said Air Force Staff Sgt. Gabe Brown, a Special Operations combat controller with Chalk 1 who was radioing directions to the jets. "We could see the bombs go down the hill below us, and we heard the material rising up past us, whizzing through the air."

The force of one bomb blast pushed back the helmet on DePouli's head. He called Self on the radio. "Can we get a little bit of a head's-up down here the next time we're going to make a bomb run like that?" Canon asked the platoon leader.

Self replied, "Yeah, sure, no problem."

With the enemy's southern knoll position eliminated and the northern ridgetop secured, the Rangers resumed carting the casualties – five wounded and six dead – to the other side of the ridge crest. The move, 80 to 100 yards up a snow-covered rocky incline, required four to six men to transport one casualty.

Again turning to the question of evacuation, the Rangers felt an even greater sense of urgency because of the two fresh casualties. The Ranger medic listed them both in the gravest category, "urgent surgical." He was not entirely sure just how serious Cory's injuries were, but he was definitely worried about Cunningham.

The medic had stopped Cunningham's external bleeding, but he had little idea what was happening inside. Only days before, Cunningham had been lobbying commanders to allow PJs to carry blood packs on missions and had won permission to do so. Now he received one of the blood packs he had brought to Takur Ghar.

**"I Tried to Keep a Monotone"**

As worrisome as Cunningham's condition was, commanders were wary of attempting another daylight rescue, knowing that this was part of what had got them into trouble in the first place that morning.

Also occupying the commanders' attention was the rest of the battle, with about 1,200 to 1,400 troops of the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne divisions spread throughout the valley and swarms of U.S. fighter jets, bombers, helicopters and other aircraft in the skies above.

Earlier in the day, military intelligence sources had reported as many as 70 enemy fighters converging on the ridgetop. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Jim Hotaling, a combat air controller who had a commanding view of enemy positions atop Takur Ghar from a ridge about two miles to the

south, never saw anything approaching 70 enemy reinforcements. But he did see small groups of several fighters each maneuvering up the mountain during the day.

"Most of the enemy I was engaging was a good 1,500 to 2,000 meters away from their position, down on the bottom of the mountain and in the creek beds," Hotaling said.

At least some of the Rangers believed a daylight evacuation could be carried out and was worth the risk.

"If we had CAS [close air support] on station dropping bombs, we could have gotten out of there at that time," Vance said in his statement. "Just having the planes nearby kept the enemy away."

Vance added: "I kept telling controller that we lost another one, cold PZ, when are we getting exfiltrated? Controller said to hold on. After asking him three times, PL [platoon leader, meaning Self] expressed urgency at getting the team out of there. I continued to tell controller but he just kept telling me to hold on. After the third time, I handed the hand mike to the PL and asked him to tell controller the same thing.

"I tried to keep a monotone voice. There were times that I tried to throw some words in there to make controller realize that we have to get out. It became a personal conversation, and we kept saying we have to get out of here," Vance said.

Once, the Ranger medic got on the radio and tried to convey to headquarters the gravity of the injuries. "I felt as though if I started making a big deal about their condition, then it would worry my patients," the medic said. "You want to be open and honest, and I was, but I wasn't jumping up and down, ranting and raving, that this guy was going to die if we don't get him off this mountain.

"I said, 'Listen, here's the story. I've got two urgent surgical patients, and we need to be evac-ed.' And their response was, 'Roger, we understand.',"

The medic repeatedly assured Cunningham and the others that help was on the way. But the aircrew, especially the pilots, knew their commanders' preference for nighttime evacuations.

"I kept coming back to them saying, 'Hey guys, listen, they're going to come get us, we're going to be out of here soon, hang in there,' " the medic said. "And it was the helicopter pilots who were pretty upfront about it, and they said, 'We know we're not leaving until dark because that's just the way it is.'

"I knew in the back of my head that the chances of them coming during daylight hours were slim to none, but I was trying to be positive about it," the medic said.

Cunningham's reaction? "For the most part, he listened."

**Psalm 121**

As the sun sank around 5 p.m., the wind kicked up and the ridgetop turned frigid.

"You couldn't get enough oxygen," Wilmoth said. "Everyone's throat was bleeding, coughing up some blood. Everyone had bad sore throats and dehydration."

The Soldiers searched the chopper for items – crew bags, equipment kits, anything that could provide warmth or something to eat.

"We probably found enough food for everybody to have a bite of something and put something in their stomachs – whether it was a pack of crackers or a Power Bar or sharing half of a cold meal" from military rations, Canon said.

Don, the chopper's air mission commander, peeled off the aircraft's sound insulation liner for blanketing the casualties. Some of the men built a lean-to out of wood from a bombed tree to keep the wind off the wounded.

"Pants, sweat shirts, jackets, blankets, sleeping bags – anything we could find that would retain heat was given to the casualties," the medic said. "Some had upwards of a foot of stuff on top of them to keep them warm."

Seated on the ridgetop, admiring the stunning vistas, Stebner told Wilmoth about how strange it was to be in such a beautiful place amid such dire conditions.

The evening before their mission, some of the Rangers, attending a Bible study group at Bagram air base to the north, had read a passage about mountains and deliverance. It was Psalm 121, which begins, "I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?"

The psalm held particular meaning for Self, who thought of it during the first moments of the firefight that morning as he rushed off the helicopter. The passage had stuck with him since a day on a road march as a West Point cadet, when he passed a chaplain standing on a hill reciting the psalm.

But as he and his men waited to be evacuated, Self did not want them getting too contemplative, and especially too mournful. Not yet.

"There were a few times here and there where guys would start to reflect on what had just happened, and their minds started to affect them a little bit," Self recalled. At those points, he would tell them, "Hey, you've got tomorrow and the rest of your lives for that."

Shortly after nightfall – at 6:10 p.m. local time, according to Self's records –Cunningham perished.

"I could tell you that we did everything that we could do up there," the medic said. "He had hung on for hours, and it was simply his time."

Two hours later, at 8:15 p.m., three evacuation helicopters began lifting everyone off the ridgetop. A fourth picked up the SEAL team on the side of the mountain.

The first helicopter landed with its tail ramp at the opposite end of where the troops had planned for it to go. The Rangers once again had to carry the casualties across icy, rocky terrain, this time 40 or 50 feet, the length of the chopper.

"It was more than once that we had to stop and set down, or one guy slipped on the ice," the medic said. "We never dropped a casualty. But I know it was uncomfortable for the casualties, even with the pain control stuff they were given. I know they were hurting. They made it pretty vocal."

Within an hour, all the troops, their wounded and dead, were loaded and gone.

**"There's No Right Answer"**

All told, seven Americans died on Takur Ghar that day and four were seriously wounded. In honor of the first to perish there, many among the Special Operations forces now refer to the place as Roberts' Ridge.

As for the number of al Qaeda killed, military officials do not have an exact count. The Rangers figure they shot at least 10 enemy fighters during the course of the day. Other tallies, based on accounts of the firefight involving the SEAL rescue team and U.S. airstrikes, have put the total enemy killed at as high as 40 or 50.

"It really wasn't our concern to have a good enemy body count when we left," Self said. "If they were dead, they were dead."

Operation Anaconda ended inconclusively 19 days later. The military disrupted al Qaeda in the Shahikot valley, but an unknown number of enemy fighters slipped away to regroup over the border in Pakistan.

In the end, the Rangers accomplished their mission. They retrieved the bodies of all U.S. servicemen on the ridgetop, leaving no one behind.

Don, the air mission commander on the downed helicopter, said he was later told by a member of the SEAL rescue team that if the Rangers had not arrived when they did, the SEALs would not have lasted much longer. Although the SEALs had already started down the mountain by then, they were still under attack.

"The fire had been focused on them, and when we came in, it got diverted," Don said.

The events of March 4 have underscored the U.S. military's commitment to doing whatever is necessary to prevent any U.S. Soldiers – alive or dead – from being left on a battlefield. But the episode also has provoked debate among at least some military officials familiar with the details about the need for establishing minimal thresholds for dispatching rescue teams – thresholds that

would balance the need for urgent response against the risks of going in with incomplete information.

Releasing an official report yesterday on the battle on Takur Ghar, Army Gen. Tommy Franks, the Central Command chief responsible for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, dwelt on the bravery and tenacity of the American troops involved. As for the intelligence lapses, communications breakdowns and questionable command judgments, he suggested they were simply part of the "fog" and "uncertainty" that are "common to every war."

Other military officials said the battle has led to improved communications and other changes in U.S. military operations in Afghanistan that cannot be discussed publicly. Efforts also have been made at the field level to advance coordination between conventional and Special Operations forces.

"There was no reason to believe from history that we should have been doing it any differently than we had been up to this incident," said Army Maj. Gen. Franklin L. "Buster" Hagenbeck, who commanded Operation Anaconda from his headquarters at Bagram air base. "But we've just decided that we'll always know what each other are doing at any given time."

If the Rangers who fought on the mountain find fault with the way the mission was mounted, they are keeping any criticism to themselves. They say they knew, when they signed up, that duty on quick-reaction forces would be hazardous.

"At our level, everyone did his job superbly that day," DePouli said. "We did everything we could do. We were in a crappy situation, and we came out on top."

The Rangers, and the Army helicopter crews and Air Force members who were with them, cite a number of actions that they believe kept the casualty tally lower than it might have been.

Reflecting, for instance, on his decision to break off the Rangers' first attempted assault on the northern bunker, Self noted that the assault team included the most senior Rangers on the ridge at the time. If they had died, Self said, the others would have stood little chance of survival.

"We could have tried it again and had a couple of guys get some posthumous Medals of Honor," Self said. "But I don't know if anybody else would have gotten out of there."

Self also observed that if Chalk 2 had not made it up the mountain when it did, and then quickly assaulted the ridgetop, Chalk 1 would likely have been more exposed to the enemy's counterattack from the southeast.

"We would have had the whole force laying on the side of the hill, getting shot from behind," Self said.

Still, the Rangers remain haunted by other decisions, especially to delay their evacuation until dark. Could an earlier evacuation have saved Cunningham's life?

"It's something we've been asking ourselves now for the better part of a month and a half," Capt. Joseph Ryan, the commander of Alpha Company, which includes Self's platoon, said in an interview in early May. "But there's no right answer to that question."

Said Self: "So many decisions we made that day that could have gone the other way. A lot of what-ifs. That was one of those decisions. It was a dilemma, and there were consequences."

All in all, it was a day of both tragedy and courage, of bad luck and fortuitous timing, of poor coordination and true grit. The Ranger medic spoke about the "positives" and the "negatives" of the experience.

"The positives are, we got to play the game and everybody did exceedingly well," he said. "Everybody did what they were trained to do, everybody performed well above the standard. It's negative because, in getting to play the game, losing is very final, it's very ugly. And until you really see it like we got to see it, it's kind of this mysterious thing.

"Quite frankly," he added, "I think that if guys with our job dealt with it or thought about it quite a bit, there would be a lot fewer of us."